

# Peacemaking Circles

## A process for solving problems and building community

The peacemaking circle is a process that brings together individuals who wish to engage in conflict resolution, healing, support, decision making or other activities in which honest communications, relationship development, and community building are core desired outcomes.

"Circles" offer an alternative to contemporary meeting processes that often rely on hierarchy, win-lose positioning, and victim/rescuer approaches to relationships and problem solving.

Derived from aboriginal and native traditions, circles bring people together in a way that creates trust, respect, intimacy, good will, belonging, generosity, mutuality and reciprocity. The process is never about "changing others", but rather is an invitation to change oneself and one's relationship with the community.

Circles intentionally create a sacred space that lifts barriers between people, opening fresh possibilities for connection, collaboration and mutual understanding. The process works because it brings people together in a way that allows them to see one another as human beings and to talk about what matters.

Circles can be understood in terms of the values and principles upon which they operate, and the structures they use to support these values and principles.

**Values and Principles** - Though each circle develops its own values and principles, all peacemaking circles generally:

- are designed by those who use them
- are guided by a shared vision
- call participants to act on their personal values
- include all interests, and are accessible to all
- offer everyone an equal, and voluntary, opportunity to participate
- take a holistic approach, including the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual
- maintain respect for all
- encourage exploring instead of conquering differences
- invite accountability to others and to the process

**Structure** - Circles provide effective support to groups seeking to stay on course with the values and principles they have established for their circle.

The circle process is "simple but not easy," and must be experienced to be fully grasped and replicated. There is an intangible quality to circles that must be experienced to be understood. However, there are some key structures that help to define the circle.

- The *meeting space* is the most visible structure. Participants are seated in a circle focusing on the center where symbolic objects may be placed to remind participants of values shared among those in the circle.
- A *talking piece* is used as a way to ensure respect between speakers and listeners. The talking piece is passed from person to person within the circle and only the person holding the piece may speak.

Outside Boston, a grassroots organization, Roca, Inc., uses circles to give teenagers, homeless youth, and gang members a healthy way of dealing with conflict.

- Two "*keepers*" of the circle have been identified. The keepers guide the participants and keep the circle as a safe space. While it is possible to have only one keeper, generally a team of two is preferable.
- *Ceremony and ritual* are used to create safety and form.
- *Consensus decision making* honors the values and principles of peacemaking circles and helps participants to stay grounded in them.

In a Canadian adult male prison unit, circles include staff and inmates, and serve as a foundation for a relationship oriented community.

**Benefits of Circles** - Circles strengthen relationships and build community. They do so through the *process* they use to deal with specific issues around which a peacemaking circle might be called. As they experience circles, participants begin to develop the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual habits of peacemaking. The circle process helps to shift old patterns in how individuals and communities interact, a shift that over time becomes reflected in interactions outside the circle. Circles:

- build relationships
- foster open dialogue
- encourage values-based action
- provide a space to acknowledge responsibility
- facilitate innovative problem-solving
- address the deeper causes of conflict
- empower participants and communities
- break through isolation
- bring healing and transformation

**When to Use Peacemaking Circles** - There are different reasons for bringing people together, and so circles are used for different purposes. Circles may be called for conflict, talking, healing, brainstorming and management, court-related issues, art, support, and family issues. Circles are appropriate in business, family, judicial, social service, artistic and other settings.

Circles are effective in any group settings in which there is a desire for:

- Healing rather than coercion
- Individual and collective accountability rather than only individual accountability
- Democratic, egalitarian and spiritual values
- Focusing on the commonalities, instead of the differences, between people
- Building community
- Individual and collective change and transformation

Circles are appropriate in business, family, judicial, social service, artistic and other settings. . .

*"I felt finally like we were a part of something,  
that we were finally 'together'  
on something that was so powerful  
. . . and it felt like community."*



Sources: Carolyn Boyes-Watson, Suffolk College; Jon Prichard, University of Maine; Pranis, K., Barry Stuart and Mark Wedge, 2003, *Peacemaking Circles, From Crime to Community*, Living Justice Press.